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Latin American Trends

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LATIN AMERICAN TRENDS

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Argentina: New Political Curbs

Last week's decision by the junta to strip a number of former Peronist officials of all their political rights for alleged "immoral conduct" is being widely, though privately, criticized.

Ex-president Maria Estela Peron headed a list of 36 former government officials of Peronist supporters deprived of the right to vote, run for union or public office, or hold any public position. Former economic minister Jose Gelbard, a naturalized Argentine, was stripped of his citizenship.

The US embassy in Buenos Aires reports that many politicians see the junta's move as a tactical and unnecessary mistake, particularly since the government already had available any number of laws with which to punish transgressors. The embassy believes, moreover, that the junta weakens, rather than strengthens, its case by referring vaguely to "immorality" rather than specific violations of law.

Political figures have also criticized a junta decree issued earlier this month, which they interpret as a total ban on any and all political activity, even group discussions of current events. The law was handed down along with two others that banned a number of extreme leftist splinter groups not already specifically covered in early junta decrees. Death by firing squad has been reinstated as a punishment for attacks on police or other officials.

Taken together, the new measures constitute an advance, but not a major victory, for military advocates of a sterner approach to government. The list of persons deprived of political rights, for example, was relatively small, much more so than might have been expected. Moreover, virtually all the leftist groups now formally banned had already gone underground and were of little consequence. Nonetheless, hardliners will be encouraged to press for more vindictive measures and fewer constraints on their countersubversive efforts. (CONFIDENTIAL)

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